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Game Design


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The Fall of the Toys

For many of us, our first gift was a toy—a rattle or perhaps a teddy bear for the new baby. All throughout childhood we yearn for more toys. Newer and brighter ones—the ones with kung fu grip or the Barbie corvette. But we reach a certain age when toys are no longer acceptable—maybe as collectibles, but not as play things. Many times in the game industry, if a product is lacking an explicit goal or endpoint, it is labeled as a mere toy and scoffed at with a sort of resentment. They are perceived as a waste of time. Why the change of heart? Greg Costikyan says in his paper “I Have No Words and I Must Design: Toward a Critical Vocabulary for Games”, that without victory conditions or objectives, software toys are failing. I disagree wholeheartedly; toys deserve their place in the game industry due to their relaxing, educational, and creative properties.

What is a toy anyway? Aren't toys and games the same? Well, no. While you can play with both, games have a winning condition, a goal set by the developers for players to strive for. They do have a lot in common, but most toys tend to be more open-ended. Remember playing with dolls? There was no winning at dolls, but you never stopped enjoying the dolls because of this. You create your own stories and with goals. Playing a board game was never better than playing with blocks, it was just different. So why do things change as we get older?

Society is partially to blame for the fall of toys. Centuries of thinking that even children should not play, stressed the idea that adults could especially not partake in such a jovial display. While the Methodist Church in the 1700s condemned its children, they most assuredly condemned themselves. Even now, in a time where playing is encouraged in children, adults are slow to fall into the idea. When they do play—they play with a purpose. They play games. Why? So they have something to show for their efforts. Sports, for example, have clear physical advantages, and they ease the urge for

competition. Sudoku or a crossword puzzle strengthens the brain. In fact, the popularity of Brain Age and Big Brain Academy learning games are due to mostly adults wanting to feel a sense of accomplishment after playing. Society has made clear to us that playing with toys is for kids. This is evident even in marketing choices; nothing in a toy store is made to packaged to appeal to an older consumer. Adults have more important things to worry about. However, the idea that there is nothing to gain from a toy is a false assumption. A toy can strengthen the reflexes and brain just as much as a game with strict goals. The problems stems from the lack of toys created for older audiences. 

So what is the difference between traditional and electronic toys? Is there any? In some cases portability is an issue but even with electronic toys on portable systems do we feel the disdain of the industry like with Electropunkton for the Nintendo DS. Electropunkton's review in Electronic Gaming Monthly acknowledged that it was fun, but chided it for not being able to do anything else. Electropunkton is an adorable application where the user makes music in several different ways. In one level they adjust the angle of a leaf that shoots out a drop of water onto another plant. The plant's leaves can be adjusted as well. Different pitches are produced based on the leaves that the droplets hit. Aside from being musical, the game shows a graphical representation of the tunes you create. But it wasn't enough for the reviewers. They wanted to save their clips. They wanted to *prove* their music genius to the world. In actuality it doesn't take much to be a musical genius with Electropunkton. All the tones are complementary to each other so everything sounds good. Is this a cop out on the developer's side? No! It's not the game's purpose to prepare you for a career in the Arts. It's a tool for you to lose yourself within much like the mesmerizing visualizations that play alongside your music.

What else could separate e-toys from their physical counterparts? Price? Well there are several pricey goods in your local Toys R Us, so how could this be the issue? But perhaps it is. The average newly released digital game or toy is anywhere from \$35 to \$65 dollars. Factor longevity into this however, and price could be a deciding factor. By longevity I mean the amount of time before a person puts down a thing for good. If people aren't getting what they deem as enough use out of a toy compared to what they payed for it, of course they might be upset. Well this is a problem of matching.

Just like every game doesn't suit every person, neither does every toy. But there are an disproportionate amount of software toys so the whole lot quickly gets a bad reputation. Personally, I have a lot of games that I spent many a pretty penny on, yet I immediately found their game play unappealing. I think the average person sees this as themselves giving up on the game, rather than the game giving up on them, as is the case with toys.

Now there are some popular e-toys. The Sims, for example, is a best seller. What is the Sims except a virtual doll house—one of the most basic of toys. The story line you play is up to you. If your goal is to make a family of alien children, then so be it. The multitude of skins and user created content, plus developer added oddities makes almost anything possible. Adults and youth alike enjoy the Sims. It taps into the basic instinct to tinker with things and relationships—to see how one can affect change without real consequence. These successful toys are rare, however. Costikyan notes in his paper that when a user plays a toy like a game, setting their own goals, that the toy is a game. Despite being contradictory to his statement that toys are failures to do their lack of victory and goals, this statement also implies that anything that cannot be played “like a game” is not worth the shelf space it is given. This is the kind of attitude that confines toys to such a small box and discourages designers from making them. The industry should focus on making more electronic toys. They will help to attract a wider audience to the realm of gaming, as well as stimulate the minds of those who are already gamers. A wider range of toys is needed so that they can be enjoyed by all the different types of players.

Toys have all the same admired qualities of games. They teach, entertain, and allow role-playing and escapism among other things. Even though it seems like most toys are one-sided, community can be a strong part of them. The Sims, for example, has a large online community in which stories, skins, houses, even Sims are traded amongst users. Nothing stops toys from being competitive either. Picking an aspect on which to compete is left up to the user. In Viva Pinata, for example, users tend a virtual garden which entices pinatas to come settle down in it. Users could choose to compete on the variety of animals in their gardens, or perhaps on the amount of golden

chocolate coins they acquire. Toys aren't all a walk in the park, either. They can provide struggle in the same way that games do. Sim City requires several needs to be fulfilled before certain events will happen. Houses cannot be built if there is no water and electricity. Maintaining a debt free city is no easy task either. These are goals one can strive for, but they're not necessary in order to play.

Toys have the uncanny ability to relax players in ways that games cannot achieve. Because there are no strict win-lose criteria, the player can shift their focus from one aspect to another without damaging their progress. Toys also help boost creativity and inspiration. Many games, movies, and TV shows have been based off of toys. Even Viva Pinata has a Saturday morning cartoon based on it. Toys adorn the desks of game professionals everywhere, which makes the rejection of e-toys even more baffling. But when goals are self-realized, the road to success is sometimes difficult to find. What metrics are used to tell if a city is doing well in Sim City? Population? Money? It's very open-ended, which some people can't handle. Toys require greater patience than games for this reason.

People expect toys and games to be the same, but they are fundamentally different. Toys require imagination and creativity on the player's part, where games only require action. Once you learn to accept the differences, only then can you really appreciate a good toy. 